DAVID AND I

BY HAYS BLACKMAN.

"I wouldn't live with you always for anything in the world." I tossed my curls back with a pout as I said it and settled my sunbonnet with a determined air.

"Neither would I with you always," David answered, kicking the dust in a cloud from beneath his angry feet.

David and I were on our way to school. Neither of us could have told how our quarrel began, for our anger was waxing hotter each moment. We plodded side by side in angry silence. What his thoughts were I could judge by my own, and I was thinking of something to say mean enough to show him how angry I was. I swung my book-strap savagely till my Latin grammar fell to the ground, but I told me I would not condescend to bother, so I was forced to stoop to the dust and pick the book up myself.

"I hate you," I said at last. No answer from David.

"I don't see how I could ever think I liked you. I won't marry you when I am grown and I won't wear your old ring."

I dragged the offending circlet on my finger and tendered it to him. David put his hands in his pockets, turned his face away and began to whistle "Home, Sweet Home," which classic ditty was then at the height of public favor, so I cast the dust at his feet after the manner of the heroines in my favorite novels, and walked on, leaving him standing in the road alone.

David was fourteen years and a half and I was two months his junior. We had been next-door neighbors and playmates since we took our first lessons in crawling together, our respective mothers inciting us to mild rivalry in the art as they knelt on the back piazza at our home and held David and me by our petticoats to steady our uncertain wabblings. We made mud pies and played keep house together, and in our pinafore days had entered into the engagement which had since been broken and mended unnumbered times.

David and I were in the same classes at school. He always worked my algebra problems for me, because I never could understand mathematics, but after we quarreled he did not offer to help me and I was too angry to ask him, so I missed my lesson. Not that it mattered particularly, for the day of our quarrel was the last day of all summer school, and the next Friday I left home for my first term at boarding school.

David and I did not speak in the interim. Thursday evening mother sent me over to tell David's father and mother good-by. After I had kissed them both, while we were standing on the front porch, I saw David peeping through the honeysuckle at the corner of the house. He saw me looking at him, and pretended to be hunting bird nests, but his father called him.

"Tell Puss good-by," he ordered, and David and I shook hands with the tips of our fingers.

"Why, what?" David's father said. "Kiss him Puss; David, kiss Puss." He put a compelling hand on each of our heads. We made ourselves as stiff-necked as we could, but he pushed us till our faces were close together. Brought thus into close proximity, David showed an inclination to make up, but I drew back stiffly, and put my hands behind me.

"I won't kiss him," I declared. "I don't want to kiss her," David echoed.

"Tut, tut," David's father said. "Have you two been quarreling again? Why, you ought to be like brother and sister."

"I don't want to be his sister," I said, stubbornly.

"I won't be her brother," David echoed, doggedly, studying the pattern he was tracing with the toe of his shoe on the piazza floor; whereat our elders laughed, and I ran home in a passion.

The ring I returned to David on the day of our quarrel he had given me the summer we were 12 years old. He bought it with money that he earned driving old Mrs. Hodges's cow to pasture every day for a month, and I went with him to the racket store in town to help make the selection. I wanted a white stone setting, because David's big sister's sweetheart had just given her a diamond ring, but David's fancy inclined to a blue set that the storekeeper called "sapphire," and, as David was the purchaser, my choice had to give way to his superior will. Though I had given the ring back to David, it left a black mark on my finger, with a suspiciously brassy odor, which no amount of washing would efface. This evening, when I ran home, I scrubbed it more vigorously, being moved thereto by fresh anger. But after supper I crept out of the house and stole in the moonlight to the fence between our yard and the yard at David's house. I sat down by the rose bush on the division line, where David and I had played house when we were dresses, and I cried. I wished—oh, how I wished—that I had made friends with David when the opportunity offered.

Besides the two girls' colleges, to one of which I was a pupil, the State University was located in the little town where I was sent to boarding school. In the last year that I spent at school a young Virginian was a fellow in the university teaching, and at the same time taking the postgraduate course. He was a graduate of the University of Virginia, belonged to the broken-down aristocracy of the State, and had the quality of bearing and the courtliness of manner that are the heritage of this well-bred Southerner.

Every Sunday the girls of our school, fifty strong, gaited experts alike, in blue uniforms, marched two abreast after a teacher to the Presbyterian Church, and filed into the pews set apart for their use. It wasn't long before I noticed that Professor Maury's mind was taking a religious bent; at least he was a regular attendant at church, and one day, when the pastor called on our principal, I passed the parlor door in time to hear Brother Clarke say that the professor must be getting in a state of grace, because he took such deep interest in the sermons. The professor sat behind us in church and I had a strong suspicion that if his attention started for the pulpit it was generally intercepted before it reached Brother Clarke; anyhow I usually felt it on my back hair during sermontime.

After church the university students lined up on either side of the brick walk that led from the church to the gate and we marched between the ranks. One Sunday I was astonished to see Professor Maury join the idlers. He was taller than most of the boys and his reddish-brown mustache made his face seem much older than their smooth-shaven faces. The thought of the disturbed professor putting the cares of the Sunday distractions worried on my sense of humor so keenly that I had all I could do to keep a smile out of the corners of my mouth. I thought he deserved some reward however, for his heroism in making himself a target for the frivolous students, so I gave him a glance out of the tail of my eye when the teacher wasn't looking, and honored the pin which fastened the rose I was wearing, so that I accidentally lost the flower just as we passed him. The girl behind me trod on it, but I saw the professor pick the crushed thing up and pin it on his coat.

One evening in the next week I had been out in town to the dressmaker's. The chancellor's wife overtook me on the way home. She had the professor under her wing and introduced us, and we walked on together a little way. The chancellor's wife did most of the talking. I was thinking how every individual hair in the princess's false front would stand erect if she saw me coming home with a young man, even under the chaperonage of the chancellor's wife. I didn't care for the damage to Mrs. Digby's false front, but I knew if she saw me she would curtail my privileges in the matter of going into town alone. The professor was apparently gathering the courage to say something, and presently he broke into the chancellor's wife's small talk with a request that he might call at the college.

I told him that Mrs. Digby would be delighted to see him; that young men were her hobby, and that she was never happier than when she got one in her own parlor where she could make a special and microscopic study of his motives and frailties. The professor looked slightly alarmed, but explained humbly that he did not want to call on Mrs. Digby, but on me. I assured him that if he attempted such an infraction of boarding-school rules, he would not see me unless he walked over Mrs. Digby's dead body, and then I said good evening and left them. The chancellor's wife had a twinkle at the back of her eye, but the professor sighed and looked determined.

Next morning Professor Maury walked boldly up to the front door of the college, rang the bell, and asked for Mrs. Digby. The chancellor's wife came along in the capacity of first aid to the wounded, I think, and the three were closeted together for nearly an hour. What arguments they brought to bear I could never tell, but Mrs. Digby wrote to daddie. The professor wrote, too, and it was decided that Professor Maury might call at the college once in two weeks.

By the time the professor had called twice I was pretty sure of his intentions. He took everything in perfect seriousness and apparently the funny side of the situation did not appeal to him. I was less certain of myself. I had played at love with boys who attached no more meaning to the game than did I, but I had never seen anyone take the sport as seriously as did the professor, and I began to feel a queer little flutter around my heart that I did not understand. And the funny part of it was, that the longer the professor stayed away, the better I liked him, till, when the two weeks were past, I was sure that I loved him, and just after his calls I was certain that I didn't like him at all. Mattie Cowan, my chum and room-mate, said this was a good sign, but Mattie had never been in love.

Professor Maury's sister spent commencement with him. She called me "Miss Carolyn" at first (no one had ever before called me anything but Puss after the first meeting, except Mrs. Digby); but on field day, when Mattie and I were allowed to go to the campus with her, she grew confidential and told me of the trouble that she and her brother had after their parents died. She was nice and good, but she had a compelling mournfulness about her that brought my ever-ready tears to the surface. I didn't expect to be called on to cry, and was not prepared; so it was my best lace handkerchief that I made soggy with my tears and my eyes red and bleary as Mrs. Digby's pet poodle's. I never could weep gracefully. Then Miss Maury patted my hand and told me how glad she would be to see the professor marry some sweet, sympathetic girl, who would brighten his life, and after that she called me "Puss."

Our school closed a week before the university, and the chancellor's wife invited Mattie and me to stay with her during commencement. The professor took us to the commencement ball. I wore my graduating frock of white organdie, but all the time I was enjoying myself I had an uneasy feeling that I must decide once and for all that night whether I really liked the professor.

I kept away from him till after supper, but while I waited on the gallery for my partner to bring me a glass of water I saw the professor come out of the hall. He looked as if he were searching for something he had lost, so I made myself as small as possible and hid behind a palm. The plant wasn't big enough to hide my ruffles, though, and the professor came straight to me. He began at once. He had a beautiful declaration made up. I know he had to the way he started off, but he forgot everything except the beginning and blundered through his speech like an embarrassed school boy. I was so sorry for his embarrassment that I liked him. He looked so tall and so helpless, and I let him take my hand in his.

He drew a ring from his own finger, a beautiful clear diamond that he said was his mother's engagement ring and asked if I would wear it. But before he could slip it on my finger, suddenly there flashed over me the remembrance of a ring that a little boy bought for his child sweetheart with the money he earned driving old Mrs. Hodges's cow to pasture. I always thought the set was only blue glass and I wanted a diamond when we chose it, but now the storekeeper's sapphire seemed to me a thousand times prettier than the professor's diamond. There was a magnolia tree just beyond the gallery, but instead of the scent of its blossoms, I smelt a half-forgotten, brassy odor and in the moonlight I could almost see again the black mark left on my finger by the ring David gave me when we were 12 years old.

The professor still held my hand. I wondered dreamily if he would try to kiss me and whether his mustache would tickle my lips if he did. And out of my childhood another recollection struggled. Now Maury is a very excellent name, and Mattie and I had often tried "Mrs. Maury," to hear how it would sound, and had written it in our very best script on blank visiting cards to see how it would look; but the professor's parents had offset his surname with Peter. Old Mrs. Hodge's husband (the old Mrs. Hodge, whose cow David drove to pasture) was named Peter, and on one occasion when David and I had been at her house at dinner time she had constantly warned him: "Peter, your beard is in the gravy, Peter, wipe the lemon pie off your whiskers." Now, as I looked at the professor, I imagined myself sitting opposite him at table three times a day, three hundred and sixty-five days in the year, and admonishing him: "Peter, my love, take your mustache out of the soup." The more I thought of it, the more the idea tickled my fancy and I laughed; laughed till the tears rolled down my cheeks and I gasped for breath, till I had forever established for myself a reputation for rudeness and had hopelessly offended the professor.

Six years, especially if taken in the formative period of a girl's character, is ample time for forgetfulness and between my fifteenth and twentieth birthdays I thought very little of David. His parents moved away soon after I was sent to school, and we lost sight of the family. But the episode of the ring had recalled David to my mind, and I thought about him very often that summer. I stayed at home and mooned, I went to church regularly and lost my appetite and read a good deal of poetry.

Mother and daddie shook their heads and said that it was overstudy. Mattie came to visit me and she said it was love. She and I discussed the question pro and con to decide whether the professor was the cause, but I could not settle it satisfactorily. Mattie said it was not the professor, and as she was engaged at that time, I trusted to her superior judgment and took her word. I didn't mention David to Mattie, I thought if I did, she might possibly diagnose the case on that basis. What worried me most of all was that I could not remember what David and I quarreled about. If I could only have remembered how the quarrel began, I might have found a reason to justify the fact that I had refused to make friends with him.

Mattie was married in the fall. I was to be maid of honor, and the best man was a particular friend of the groom. Mattie wrote me his name, but no one could ever read her scrawl. The first letter of the name was "T" and the last looked like an "r," and I made a wild guess at those between and called him Tanner. It was stead of arriving before the others I reached Brookings last of all.

Mattie's fiance met me at the station, and when we reached the house Mattie took me off to her room and talked so long that she was not dressed when the doorbell rang.

"It's only Jack," she said. "Dick was the groom's go down, Puss, and talk with him till I come."

The library was dark except for the firelight. I drew back the portiere between the library and hall, and for a moment I could see no one in the dark. Then I saw a man standing before the grate. His hands were clasped behind his back in a fashion that I knew well; but though his face was turned to me, he was studying the wall above my head. I felt my heart stand still a second, and then beat like a trip hammer. For it was David. He had a little yellow mustache (I counted twelve bristly hairs, seven on one side and five on the other, in the awful minute before he looked at me), and he was quite six feet tall and stoop-shouldered, but otherwise, he was the same David whom I had last seen in knee-trousers nearly seven years before.

While I waited, David's eyes slowly descended to my quaking form.

"David," I gasped just above my breath.

"I beg your pardon, I did not hear," he began. Then he took a step forward.

"It's Puss," he said in an awed whisper, as if I were a ghost and liable to be frightened into disappearance at the sound of his voice, "little Puss Ford."

"It's me," I rejoined meekly, but I'm grown up; I'm not little any more." I drew myself up to my five feet three, with all the dignity I could command.

"I thought your name was Tanner," I said after the surprise had worn off, and I had learned that David was best man.

"I had no idea you were the Miss Ford I was to meet. But my name's Towne, just as it has always been. I've not thought about changing it. I hope you haven't promised anybody to change yours, Pussie," David answered.

Three days later, after we had started the newly wedded pair off on the honeymoon with the usual complement of rice and old shoes, David and I sat in the library at Brookings.

"Puss," David said, rousing out of a brown study, "who was that old codger the girls were tensing you about this morning?"

"He isn't a codger," I answered; "he belongs to the Virginia aristocracy."

"Huh!" David retorted, with contempt—then coaxingly, "Pussie, you didn't promise to marry him?"

"I shan't tell you," I said; but when David insisted, I told how I had laughed and made the professor angry, but I didn't tell about the ring.

David paced up and down the room several times with his hands clasped behind his back.

"Member how we used to make mud pies under the rose bush, Pussie?" he said, and the time we went wading and you fell in the water, and how we both got a licking when we got home?"

"Yes," I said slowly; that last recollection was not a pleasant one.

"I used to call you my sweetheart when we were little kids not higher than that," David went on, measuring off with his hand a height from the floor about equal to that of a good-sized doll. I did not answer.

"Pussie," he said suddenly, "I've been trying for the last seven years to remember what we quarreled about, and for the life of me I can't think what it was."

"Neither can I," I told him. David and I looked at each other for a minute.

"Let's make it up," said David softly, and then—I don't know how it happened, but David was holding me tight and I was blistering his shirt front with copious tears.

"Pussie," David said presently, with a queer little shake in his voice, "I won't be your brother."

"David," I answered, laughing and crying together, with my voice not one bit better than his, "I don't want to be your sister."

I told him about the ring, and David said that this time he wanted a white set. "I think sapphires are lots prettier than diamonds," I declared, but the ring on which we compromised was set with both.

HAYS BLACKMAN.

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